Stephen A. Haller and Bartholomew Lee

Resurrecting the Presidio's Historic Radio Network

The "penthouse" message center at the Fourth Army Headquarters, the Presidio of San Francisco, just before World War II. The men at the typewriters are transcribing Morse code radio messages and routing the hard copy to staff departments through a mechanical conveyor belt system known as the Lamson message conveyor. Photo courtesy Golden Gate NRA.

A small, unassuming concrete building lies abandoned behind a chain link fence on a windy hill overlooking the Pacific in a remote part of San Francisco's Presidio. The hill was the site of the antenna farm for the Presidio's World War II radio transmitters, and the building was the Coast Defense Radio Station. The Perham Foundation and the California Historical Radio Society are working with the National Park Service to research the history of the Presidio's military radio network and preserve its associated artifacts and structures.

As headquarters of the Ninth Corps Area during the inter-war years, the Presidio was an important link in the Army's radio network from Washington, DC, to Fort Shafter in Hawaii and on to the Philippines. In 1921, the first dedicated radio buildings at the Presidio began broadcasting under the call letters WVY. The chief of the Signal Corps Engineering and Development Division, Major Joseph O. Mauborgne, approved the plans for these standardized structures. A Military Affiliate Radio Station (or "MARS" station), soon joined WVY. Formerly known as the Army Amateur Radio Service, MARS trained the military to set up emergency communications facilities with civilians and was an informal conduit for messages between far-flung service personnel operating as late as the Persian Gulf War.

In the early 1930s, the Army did not have an official program of monitoring radio transmissions from Japan; it labored under Secretary of War Stimson's admonition, "Gentlemen do not read each others' mail." "Reading the mail" later became a euphemism for monitoring radio transmissions, particularly radio teletype. However Mauborgne, a colonel destined to rise to the post of commanding general of the Signal Corps before World War II, was assigned to the Presidio. He monitored and recorded Japanese radio traffic as early as 1931 and passed the intercepted coded messages to the Signal Intelligence Service in Washington. These intercepts became part of the earliest grist for the code breakers' mill that solved the Japanese machine cipher known as "Purple" in 1940. These intercepts contributed to the stream of intelligence, code named "Magic," that allowed the Allies unparalleled access to the enemy's plans and greatly contributed to the victory in the Pacific.

By 1941, the Presidio had an official, but secret, monitoring station. On the eve of World War II, the Army finished a more expansive facility for Radio Station WVY and a dedicated Harbor Defense Radio Station. Testimony from the congressional investigation of the Pearl Harbor attack makes it clear that the Presidio was intercepting Japanese radio transmissions on the eve of the attack. During the war, the Western Defense Command, headquartered at the Presidio, communicated with Washington and units across the vast Pacific theater from its "Penthouse" operating room, reached by a set of spiral stairs from the Commanding General's offices. The Coast Defense Radio Station provided signal service to one of the most heavily fortified harbors in the United States. All these structures remain extant in the Presidio, which is now a National Historic Landmark district and part of Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

Recently, technical experts from the California Historical Radio Society, with information provided by NPS historians and curators, have produced a better understanding of the operation and significance of the Presidio's radio network. They have enhanced the collection and preservation of the post's historic radio artifacts, properly identified photographs of vintage radio equipment from the 1920s, '30s and '40s, and performed oral history interviews with veteran radio operators. These experts have provided a fuller assessment of the history, integrity and future adaptability of the structures associated with the Presidio's historic radio operations.

On April 19, 1997, the California Historical Radio Society, the Perham Foundation, the Military Collectors Radio Net, and the Boy Scouts of America worked with NPS personnel to restore native plants on the site of the Coast Defense Radio Station and antenna farm. After a morning of work, members of the Military Collectors Radio Net operated World War II vintage radios for sev-

The site of the Presidio's World War II Coast Defense Radio Station has recently benefited from collaboration in research and site rehabilitation between the NPS and radio historians. Photo courtesy Golden Gate NRA.

eral hours. This activity put the Presidio "back on the air" as it was during one of its most significant periods. It also helped develop a sense of stewardship of the site's natural and cultural resources. The research, the special events, and the resource preservation activities illustrate the value of partnerships between Golden Gate NRA and local organizations.

The Presidio Trust, a newly chartered government corporation charged by Congress with seeking tenants to rehabilitate the former military post, will manage much of the Presidio. The California Historical Radio Society, the Perham Foundation, and their allies have been seeking an operating area and public museum facility to house and display their collections of early radio equipment. They are developing a program proposal to place before the Trust for the rehabilitation and adaptive re-use of the Coast Artillery Radio Station site. Such a proposal has the potential to preserve the built environment, enhance the natural resources of the landscape, bring authentic historical programming to the Presidio, and provide an appropriate home for the historic radio collections of these community groups.

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National History Day

The annual theme for the 1998-99 National History Day program and competition will be Science, Technology, Invention in History: Impact, Influence, Change. Each year, up to half a million students across the country choose topics in history related to National History Days annual theme. After months of extensive research into primary and secondary sources, these sixth-to-twelfth grade students create imaginative exhibits, performances, video or slide tape documentaries, and papers. The students present their work at a series of contests at the district, state, and national levels; the contests are judged by professional historians and educators.

During the 1998-99 school year, students will be invited to explore an enormous range of topics. Some might investigate the invention of the Arabic system of numbers, while others might explore the impact of the invention of the atomic bomb. Still others might look at the influence of the railroad on U.S. communities in the late-19th century, or the ways in which 20th-century office technology has affected the work of women. The theme challenges students to use the lens of history to look at familiar objects like bridges and television sets, and famous people like Galileo and Einstein.

The National History Day program invites the participation of museum educators, teachers, and others interested in the history of science and technology. If you would like to assist with judging or other aspects of program development for the 1998–99 theme, or if you would like to get your students or school involved with the program, please contact National History Day at 0119 Cecil Hall, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, 301-314-9739, email: <hstryday@aol.com>, or on the World Wide Web at <http://www/thehistorynet.com/NationalHistoryDay/>. The national office can refer you to state program coordinators.

In conjunction with its 1998–1999 school year theme, "Science, Technology, Invention in History: Impact, Influence, Change," National History Day will conduct a Summer Teacher Institute entitled, "Technology in History: Interactions in Everyday Life." The Institute will be held in the summer of 1998 at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, and will involve 51 teachers, one from each state and the District of Columbia.

Institute topics and activities include discussions on Women, Farmwork and Technology; Industrialism and Factories; The Individual and Technology: Inventors, Engineers, Repairman; Consumer Technology: Advertising, Progress, Change; Teaching with Technology: History and the Internet; and trips to the nearby Henry Ford Museum and NASA Lewis Research Center. Opportunities for individual research will be built into the Institute, and teachers will learn to help students research topics related to the history of science, technology, and invention as they participate in the National History Day program. For information about the Institute, please contact the National History Day office.